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About Public Agenda

Founded in 1975 by public opinion analyst Daniel Yankelovich and former Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, Public Agenda works to help average citizens better understand critical policy issues and to help the nation's leaders better understand the public's point of view. Public Agenda's in-depth research on how average citizens think about policy forms the basis for extensive citizen education work. Its citizen education materials, used by the National Issues Forums and media outlets across the country, have won praise for their credibility and fairness from elected officials from both political parties and from experts and decision-makers across the political spectrum.

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Introduction

It is hardly news that Americans are troubled by the nation’s welfare system. Public dissatisfaction with welfare “as we know it” has been strong for at least a decade, and promises to reform the system are standard fare from candidates for elected office from across the political spectrum. But exactly what is it that bothers Americans about welfare? Why are people so frustrated with the current system, and what kind of change are they really seeking?

In late 1995, Public Agenda, a nonprofit, nonpartisan research and education organization founded by Daniel Yankelovich and Cyrus R. Vance, conducted an in-depth national study to explore these questions. The study was comprehensive: it began with a review of previous surveys; continued with a series of eight focus group discussions around the country; and culminated in a national survey of 1,000 randomly-selected Americans. Also surveyed were a national oversample of 200 African-Americans, and state-wide oversamples in Florida, New York, and Illinois.

The survey—which lasted over half an hour—attempted to get beneath people’s surface opinions to understand the reasoning behind their thinking. Equally important, the study attempted to discover whether the proposals offered by leaders, both at the federal and state level, really address the public’s chief concerns.

Among the questions the study sought to answer:

• What really bothers people about welfare? The cost to taxpayers? Perceptions of widespread fraud or cheating? The failure to help recipients become self-supporting? Or something else? What is really the crux of public concern?

• How do Americans think about the people who need and get welfare? What assumptions do they make about them, and what evidence do they bring to back up their perceptions?

• Who, in the public’s mind, deserves public help and for how long? And what, if anything, do Americans expect in return?

• And finally, are the ideas proposed by leaders—reducing benefits, requiring work, setting time limits, etc.—on target from the public’s perspective? Or does the public itself have a different set of solutions in mind?

Unlike much of the current debate in Washington, this study has put very little emphasis on questions of devolution and proposals to transfer decision-making from federal to state and local governments. While this is an important, perhaps even historic, political debate, it is also just one consideration in reform. Whether decisions are made in Washington or state-by-state, the more fundamental and vexing questions for most Americans are: What should we do, what is right, what will be effective, and what can we afford?

Neither conservatives nor liberals will find a full-throated public endorsement of their position.

The public’s views, based on the results of this study, are complex and multi-layered, and neither conservatives nor liberals will find a full-throated public endorsement of their position. The public is tough-minded, but not unsympathetic. They resent much of what they see, but few are callous or smugly superior. They vent their anger at what they consider a dismal, almost insane, policy failure, but, within the space of an hour’s discussion, show a remarkable willingness to wrestle intellectually with the myriad complexities involved. In many ways, the public is more open-minded and pragmatic than leaders who see themselves as far more “informed” on the issue.

As we suggest in the following pages, the public has a distinctive analysis of what has gone wrong, and a surprisingly cohesive view of what would put it right. What’s more, many Americans seem ready to talk constructively about how to apply their vision of what welfare should accomplish in the real world.
Finding One

Americans Are Deeply Frustrated and Offended by Welfare, but Reducing the Cost to Taxpayers Will Not Eliminate Their Resentment

An overwhelming percentage of Americans believe welfare is badly flawed and urgently in need of overhaul. Even among Americans from households receiving welfare benefits, only a handful think welfare should be left as it stands. While the cost of welfare bothers Americans, most say that is not their fundamental concern. Instead, the public worries that welfare promotes the wrong lifestyle and values.

A System That’s Badly Flawed

Americans are deeply frustrated with the current welfare system and anxious to see it reformed. An astonishingly high 93% of Americans want change: Six in ten (59%) think the welfare system should be “fundamentally overhauled” while another 34% think it should be “adjusted somewhat.” Only 3% want welfare left alone and only 4% want it eliminated altogether. When asked which of five areas of government responsibility most urgently needs attention, people give first place to changing “how the government runs the welfare system,” tied at 33% with changing public schools, and ahead of such areas as crime, elections, and how we deal with other nations.

It is difficult to overstate the depth and intensity of Americans’ unhappiness with the welfare system as it now stands. The mere mention of welfare at the beginning of focus groups unleashes a torrent of negative assessments and personal indictments, all with the common theme that welfare, as the public knows it, is fundamentally flawed. People seem mystified that a system which so clearly defies their common sense, and whose outcome appears so out of sync with any reasonable measures of effectiveness, is still standing.1

"Welfare is like the U.N. They created it with good intentions, but look what’s happened." -- Albuquerque woman

"Welfare has been abused and bastardized and screwed up. So as it exists now, it’s ceased to meet its purpose." -- Middletown NY man

"It’s a system that’s very flawed. One hand doesn’t know what the other is doing. They don’t try to correct inadequacies or problems." -- Denver woman

Perhaps the most striking sign of widespread discontent is that respondents closest to welfare — those who say they or someone from their household currently receive benefits from such programs as AFDC, Medicaid or food stamps — are also dissatisfied with the current system. Only 9% of respondents from households receiving welfare would leave it as it stands. Almost nine in ten recipients want to change welfare: 42% want to fundamentally overhaul it, and an additional 46% want to adjust it.

Only 9% of respondents from households receiving welfare would leave it as it stands.

The “Cost Myth”

Some observers have suggested that many Americans are so unhappy with welfare because of its cost to them as taxpayers. They cite survey data showing that the public vastly overestimates welfare’s slice of the federal budget pie. For example, a 1995 poll showed that 21% of Americans wrongly believe that welfare is one of the most costly government programs; in another survey, 39% of the public said welfare takes up between 20% and 50% of the total federal budget, and another 9% said it took up more than half of the budget. Actually, spending on welfare programs amounted to only about 5% of the 1994 federal budget.2 If people only knew how little welfare actually costs, many of these observers reason, much of their anger and disappointment would dissipate.

But the public’s foremost complaint about welfare is not cost. By more than four to one (65% to 14%), Americans say the most upsetting thing about welfare is that “it encourages people to adopt the wrong lifestyle and values,” not that “it costs too much in tax money.”

And given a list of possible changes to welfare, decreasing costs ranks far down the public’s priorities. Only two in ten Americans (19%) think that “reducing the benefits of most welfare recipi-
"It wouldn’t matter to me if it was one dollar. I’m working hard. Every day, I make the effort. It’s the principle.”

— New York City man

“I don’t think the [cost of welfare] has anything to do with the way I feel about welfare. Whether it’s 1% or 5%, it wouldn’t matter as far as I’m concerned. I think the system is backwards.”

— Middletown, NY woman

“It doesn’t make a damn bit of difference how much it costs. People that abuse it are destroying the moral fiber of this country.”

— Sacramento man

“It wouldn’t matter to me if it was one dollar. I’m working hard. Every day, I make the effort. It’s the principle.”

— New York City man

Of course, Americans are not entirely indifferent to costs: About six in ten (59%) do say “the system costs taxpayers too much” (Table 1). But what the public seems to be saying is that welfare costs too much given all the things wrong with it.

Moreover, in the eight focus groups conducted for this study, moderators tested this issue by explaining to participants that welfare represents about 5% of the budget. Participants invariably dismissed arguments about the limited financial costs of welfare in almost derisive terms as irrelevant and beside the point.

Of nine possible reforms presented to respondents — ranging from requiring job training to paying surprise visits to make sure recipients deserve benefits — reducing benefits ranked last in popularity (Table 4).

“ents” is an “absolutely essential” approach to improving welfare. Of nine possible reforms presented to respondents — ranging from requiring job training to paying surprise visits to make sure recipients deserve benefits — reducing benefits ranked last in popularity (Table 1).
Finding Two

Americans Are Angry about Welfare Fraud, but Even If Fraud Were Eliminated, They Would Still Resent the System

Welfare fraud is an immediate and vexing concern to a substantial majority of Americans, but like the cost issue, it is not what they consider the preeminent problem. Strong majorities take welfare cheating seriously and favor a proposal to pay surprise visits to welfare recipients to make sure they deserve their benefits. Even respondents from households receiving welfare benefits subscribe to these views by sizable majorities. But most Americans do not believe that welfare programs suffer from more fraud than other government programs. They are more troubled by those who abuse the system by staying on it too long than by people who cheat. If all welfare reform accomplished were to squeeze fraud out of the system, most Americans say they would still be dissatisfied.

Fraud: Stories from Real Life

There is no question that cheating and fraud are a top public concern: 64% cite it as a very serious problem (Table 1). Moreover, welfare fraud is often the first thing people complain about in focus groups. “I hear welfare, I think scandal,” said one Albuquerque man. This perception is hardly confined to those outside the system: Two-thirds (67%) of respondents from households receiving welfare also believe welfare fraud is a very serious problem.

People spoke from real world experience and talked of seeing strangers, neighbors, or family members trick the system into giving them benefits they did not deserve.

Focus group participants typically trade horror stories of recipients getting benefits by lying or misusing their benefits: Food stamps sold at a discount and used for drugs or welfare mothers collecting for non-existent kids. Sometimes such stories echoed coverage in the media about the latest welfare scam. But more often, people spoke from real world experience and talked of seeing strangers, neighbors, or family members trick the system into giving them benefits they did not deserve.

“I work at a bank and some people are bringing in five checks totaling $2,500. And you have an old woman right behind them with a check for $300 that has to last her the whole month.”

Birmingham woman

“It’s the ability to defraud the system. They can get $100 of food stamps and turn around and get $20 of drugs on the street. There’s no policing of what they’re handing out. I’ve been in the Seven-Eleven and the kid comes in and buys $3 of food with a $10 food stamp, gets the change and goes over and spends $7 on video games.”

Denver man

Attacking Fraud — Necessary but Insufficient

Stories about fraud recur with such prominence — in ordinary people’s conversations and in the press — that some welfare experts believe the public vastly overestimates the reality. To these experts, the public’s obsession with the rare “welfare queen” and isolated instances of systematic cheating lead to unwarranted levels of public anger and disapproval. Most recipients are not cheating the system, these advocates say, and the public’s rejection of welfare is therefore driven by emotion and misinformation.

While most Americans (64%) agree that cheating to get welfare benefits is a very serious problem, they do not believe welfare programs are especially vulnerable to cheating and fraud when compared with other government programs. Six in ten (60%) say the cheating and fraud besetting welfare programs is the same as in other government programs; only 28% say it is more rampant.
Suppose There Were No Fraud

This does not mean Americans have come to accept fraud as an inevitable part of doing business. They want more rigorous enforcement of welfare regulations and better screening to make sure fraud does not occur. Almost two-thirds (64%) support a proposal to pay "surprise visits to the homes of welfare recipients to make sure they deserve their benefits." Even 63% of respondents from households receiving welfare support that proposal (Table 4). Yet such efforts may simply amount to a "good start" in the public's estimation—a necessary but insufficient component of improving welfare.

Researchers for this study asked focus group participants how much more comfortable with welfare they would be if most of the fraud and cheating were squeezed out of the system. "I'd be slightly less uncomfortable," said a Denver man, "but that doesn't stop the fundamental problems. It's the structural problems: There's no coordination between these programs, and no guidance to help recipients improve their situation."

The survey findings echo this thought. Only one-third (35%) of survey respondents would be more comfortable with welfare if the people running it eliminated most of the fraud. Fully 65% would still want the system changed.

"People take advantage of it. Sitting home, watching TV, going to amusement parks. They're using our tax money."

— Denver woman

The Real Problem? Relying on the Handout

People make a distinction between defrauding welfare and abusing it and consider abuse the real problem. "Fraud is both immoral and illegal. But the biggest problem is the abuse," said one Cincinnati man.

Most troubling, in their minds, is that welfare recipients get "too comfortable" and do not make an effort to get off. By five to one (69% to 13%), Americans say "most [recipients who use welfare illegitimately] abuse the system by taking advantage of it, for example by not looking for work when they really could be;" not that they "cheat the system by actually breaking the law, for example by using fake IDs to collect benefits." And once again, respondents from households receiving welfare agree: by a 64% to 11% margin they say abuse is a bigger problem than cheating.

"People take advantage of it. Sitting home, watching TV, going to amusement parks. They're using our tax money."

— Denver woman

As with the issue of cost, educating the public about how rarely fraud actually occurs seems unlikely to restore its confidence in the welfare system. Tightening screening procedures and weeding out "welfare cheats" may not be enough either. People are upset with fraud, and of course, would be happy to spend less on welfare. But the crux of their frustrations, and the spur of their resentment, is the system itself—a system they regard as a transparent failure that violates their fundamental principles and values.
Finding Three

Americans Are Outraged by Welfare Because They Believe It Fosters an Addictive and Self-Destructive Lifestyle That Mocks the Values They Live By

Americans are morally indignant that while they struggle and work hard, welfare recipients are spared these pressures. A large majority of Americans think welfare recipients stay on the rolls too long and do not try hard enough to get off. Moreover, they are frustrated with the incentives and results of the welfare system. They believe welfare is addictive and passed on from generation to generation. They believe it encourages recipients not to work and undermines their work ethic. And welfare, according to most Americans, fosters the wrong values. These impressions seem based on more than media images. Most Americans say they have personally seen someone abusing the welfare system.

Feeling Like Chumps

Some of the most powerful sentiments expressed in the focus group discussions convey a sense of indignant outrage many people feel toward welfare and welfare recipients. Ordinary citizens see themselves as struggling to make do, sacrificing and working hard, and playing within the rules and values of American society. But they view welfare recipients as people who have stopped struggling, who are not subject to the pressures and sacrifices they themselves must face, and who all too often mock their own commitment to work.

“They look at the working person as a chump.” — Albuquerque man

“I get up and go to work every day. And when I leave, I see them sitting on the porch, and that’s where they are when I come back. And when you start to think about that, it makes you angry.” — Birmingham woman

“Welfare has nothing to do with the amount of money it costs. I go to school and work a job and am in the National Guard. If I can do all these things and still have a 3.8 grade point, how come you can’t get off your butt and work?” — Cincinnati man

“Honest, hardworking people are getting laid off. And you can’t get medical coverage. But you walk across the border, and instantly you’re qualified. It’s too easy to get. They give you food, housing.... And we work all our lives and we don’t get the same benefits.” — Sacramento man

The resentment many Americans feel toward recipients who seem exempt from the need to make hard tradeoffs often carries a personal edge and tone. In every focus group participants would tell stories about standing behind someone with food stamps in the grocery check-out line and feeling outraged about having to shop carefully while the person in front of them made what seemed like extravagant purchases. As one woman from Sacramento said: "I go to the grocery store, and we work our rear ends off, and I have to make the best possible choices for the food I feed my family. And I see these people — stacks and stacks of steaks in their basket.”

To most Americans, welfare represents a repudiation of their own efforts to support themselves and their families and to be self-reliant even during hard times.

Coming Face-to-Face with Welfare

To most Americans, welfare represents a repudiation of their own efforts to support themselves and their families and to be self-reliant even during hard times. And to many, this repudiation is not removed and abstract but personal and direct. In virtually every focus group, one or two participants recounted instances where they had been mocked by welfare recipients for playing by the rules. While many observers suspect that people’s negative impressions of welfare are driven by sensational media stories, researchers in this study were struck by how often participants relied on personal anecdotes and first-hand experiences to make their point.

In Sacramento, a participant related a conversation with a mother on welfare:

“This woman said to me, ‘I go down to the bar, I have another child, and I get a raise. What do you do? I get paid for playing.’ That statement has remained with me.”
In Middletown, NY, a postman described this contact with welfare recipients:

"I'll be doing my route, and a 12-year-old will ask me, 'Why are you doing that, why are you working? I'm not going to do that...I'm going to be like mom and dad; I'll just receive Section 8 like they do.' At that age, they already know that: 'Why should I do what you do, sweating hard when I could just sit at home and collect for free!' There is something wrong right there."

Witnesses to Abuse

Responses to the survey conducted for this study confirm that most Americans have had some direct, first-hand experiences with welfare recipients. Twelve percent of all Americans say they or someone in their household currently receives benefits from welfare programs such as AFDC or food stamps; a surprisingly high 41% say they or someone in their close family have received benefits from such programs in the past. About six in ten have "personally seen someone abusing their welfare benefits or cheating the system." And, in a more positive light, another 53% have "personally seen someone who was in trouble get back on their feet because welfare helped them."

That so many Americans have first-hand experience with welfare is interesting in itself. But it also suggests that the public's diagnoses of welfare's ills are based on "hard" data gleaned from their own lives -- and are not solely driven by media images. Their convictions are therefore likely to be firmly held and not fleeting or subject to fluctuation.

Focus group participants often talked about welfare as if it were an addictive drug, ensnaring recipients who lose the capacity for independence and self-sufficiency -- characteristics Americans prize.

Welfare: A Hard Habit to Break

Welfare not only offends Americans because it mocks their own struggles; it also bothers them because they think it has a pernicious effect on recipients themselves. Focus group participants often talked about welfare as if it were an addictive drug, ensnaring recipients who lose the capacity for independence and self-sufficiency -- characteristics Americans prize. One of the most troubling aspects of welfare, in the public's view, is that it too often becomes a permanent lifestyle or mindset for recipients. More than seven in ten (73%) say people abusing "the system by staying on too long and not trying hard enough to get off" is a very serious problem (Table 1).

Americans have come to think of welfare as a permanent life-support system rather than an emergency rescue service. "This is the worst thing about welfare," said an Albuquerque woman, "and if you stay on it for too long, it changes you. You become complacent, dependent. You lose your dreams." More than half of those interviewed (54%) say a very serious problem is that "the system traps recipients and makes them dependent," another 27% consider this problem somewhat serious.

"When people are left on the system too long, the shame goes away. It has a negative effect on people, it gets them used to getting a handout. Welfare gets people into the mediocrity of life, and they get stuck in that rut."

-Denver man

"Welfare cripples people. They're looking for a handout -- that shouldn't be. They become dependent."

-Birmingham man

Generational Entrapment

According to the public's critique of welfare, the system is wrong not only because it traps adult recipients but also because it traps their children as well. Almost seven in ten (68%) say a very serious problem is that welfare is "passed on from generation to generation, creating a permanent underclass" (Table 1). Said a woman in Cincinnati: "Welfare is generational. It's handed down to sons and daughters -- it's a way of life." This is a compound indictment of welfare, in the public's view: It not only fosters complacency and hopelessness among recipients but replicates that mindset among new generations as well, a corrupt legacy bequeathed to children and to society.

"The biggest problem with welfare is that kids are educated to take advantage of it. They see it all their life. And they grow up, get pregnant at 14 or 15, and they know they can go on welfare. They think it's short term, but they get so used to it, it ends up being for their whole life."

-Middletown, NY man

"Their grandparents were on welfare, then their kids go on welfare, then their kids. It's a cycle."

-Denver man

The Easy Way Out

About six in ten respondents (59%) from households receiving welfare benefits also believe that
generational welfare is a very serious problem. Once again, people offer real-life experiences to buttress their perceptions:

“I was brought up in a welfare house, and I’m the only one of four kids that’s not on welfare. They were all brought up to fall right into the system. It’s the easy way out, and they abuse it. My mother abused it. She was young and able and we were all in school and she still stayed in the system. She was so used to it, it was almost like she was afraid to go out there. And they [administrators] helped her stay on it. If they said, ‘You can’t do this,’ she might be a better person today.”

— Middletown, NY woman

The System that Corrupts

For the public, welfare contradicts fundamental values which people see as the cornerstones of society: Work, commitment to family, responsibility, and self-discipline.

Some people place the blame for welfare dependence squarely on the recipients themselves. “They’re sitting around and just being lazy,” said a Cincinnati woman. Half (52%) say welfare recipients are lazier than other Americans and another half (53%) say they are more likely to be drawn to a life of drug abuse and crime (Table 8).

But Americans are far more disturbed that the welfare system allows — and even encourages — recipients to opt-out of mainstream society without suffering serious consequences. Fully 70% say a very serious problem with welfare is that it makes it “financially better for people to stay on welfare than to get a job.” Almost six in ten (57%) think that welfare undermining “the work ethic” and encouraging “people to be lazy” is a very serious problem. Another six in ten (60%) say the welfare system “encourages people to have kids out of wedlock.”

Enough Blame to Go Around

In the end, people blame both the recipients and the government.

“The system is just irresponsible government.”

— Birmingham man

“I don’t fault people in general. It’s the responsibility of the government and administrators to structure welfare so people do not get led into that rut, that they are empowered to get out and get training and take care of their families.”

— Denver man

“I’m angry but not just from my side of it, also theirs: The way the welfare system is set up, people can get trapped in it. I’m angry that the welfare system tends to hold people in it rather than showing them ways to get out of it.”

— Albuquerque man

“The system is just irresponsible government.”

— Birmingham man

Interestingly, people with direct, first-hand knowledge of the system seem to agree with the general public’s indictment: Half (52%) of the respondents from households receiving welfare say a very serious problem is that welfare traps recipients and makes them dependent. Seven in ten (71%) say a very serious problem is that it is financially better for people to stay on welfare than to get a job. Two-thirds (67%) think people staying on welfare too long is a very serious problem. Six in ten (62%) think welfare undermines the work ethic and encourages people to be lazy; and a similar percentage (64%) think welfare encourages people to have kids out of wedlock (Table 1).

Ulterior Motives?

From the public’s perspective, welfare is a destructive and counter-productive system, and many are baffled that it has been tolerated for so long by policymakers. A few suspect that ulterior motives — bureaucrats who want to keep their jobs — explain the inertia.

“It’s like psychiatrists — they’re not going to help you because if you’re cured, you’re not going to come back for another $90-hour next week. Social services does the same thing: They keep the problem going because it’s their job. If they helped people, they’d be out of a job.”

— Middletown, NY man

But many simply think this inaction reflects how disconnected government officials are from the real world. “The people in Washington do not know what people go through to make a living,” said a Denver woman. “They have no concept of what it is to do a real job.”

“The government has become a baby-sitter. People aren’t responsible for themselves so the government says we’re going to take care of them. That’s not what this government was built on, that’s not what this government should be built on.”

— Albuquerque woman
Even Though Americans Are Deeply Offended by the Current System, They Still Want the Government to Help Those in Need

Although Americans are outraged by how welfare works and the values it promotes, very few would eliminate welfare altogether. In fact, many believe welfare has done some good for the poor; and most believe government has a role to play in protecting the economic well being of the needy. When the study presented respondents with nine hypothetical welfare applicants from different circumstances — ranging from a physically and mentally handicapped man from a poor family, to a single mother who quit her job because of a lack of health benefits — majorities said they would grant eight of them welfare benefits.

But while Americans want a safety net to catch people beaten down by tough times, they want it to be a temporary intervention that allows people to catch their breath and jump back into the fray. Most think welfare has utterly failed in this regard.

"The intention of it was good — help those in need, don't let children starve. I think it's a program that we need; it just needs to be redone." — Birmingham woman

Welfare Has Done Some Good

Given people's intense repudiation of welfare, and their sense that it mocks their lifestyles and rewards irresponsible behavior, one might expect Americans to totally reject the system. This is far from the case. Only 4% want to eliminate welfare altogether; the vast majority (93%) want either to fundamentally overhaul it or adjust it somewhat. But do these overwhelming numbers mean that Americans are thoughtlessly lashing out at welfare?

All the focus group discussions conducted for this study spontaneously followed a similar pattern: First came an eruption of anger about welfare's ills; next, came suggestions about how to fix it; and then came acknowledgments that welfare is sometimes necessary and has done some good.

"My step-daughter was on welfare while she went to school and took computer courses. She had rent and health care and stuff, and then she got off. That's the perfect example of it working." — Albuquerque man

"The intention of it was good — help those in need, don't let children starve. I think it's a program that we need; it just needs to be redone." — Birmingham woman

In response to the survey, half of all Americans (50%) say that "people may complain about welfare, but it has done a lot of good for the poor." And despite the unpopularity of specific welfare programs, 88% still agree that, "Despite their flaws, programs like food stamps, AFDC, and Medicaid help millions of poor adults and children live healthier lives."

A Responsibility to Help the Needy

Americans still seem committed to the notion of collective responsibility for the unfortunate, and in this, they assign a role to government.

Although there is a knee-jerk tendency to dismiss the government as ineffectual and bumbling, Americans seem to think that there are some things only government can do. About seven in ten (72%) say "the government may not always be efficient, but sometimes we have to rely on it to do things no one else can;" only 24% say instead "it's very hard for the government to do anything right. We should rely on it as little as possible."

Moreover, most Americans assign government responsibility for helping the truly needy. When asked to define the government's responsibility for the economic well-being of its citizens, only 29% think government should play no role, saying that families and charities should instead help people who cannot take care of themselves. But a 45% plurality thinks the government should help those who cannot take care of themselves, and an additional 24% take a far more expansive definition, saying the government should be responsible for the economic well-being of everyone.

"There are definite situations where people need help. And anyone who needs help for short-term, it's fine. There are people on the streets because of catastrophes, and I can't fault the government for wanting to help them." — Cincinnati man

"The government has an obligation to the citizens and the citizens have an obligation to the government. It's a two-way street. We work and pay our taxes, and if we fall on hard times, assistance should be there." — Albuquerque man
While Americans believe society should help the needy, they are divided over whether ending poverty itself is a realistic goal. Nearly half (49%) say, “It’s morally wrong for our society to have some people who are very poor and it doesn’t have to be that way—we should work to end poverty.” On the other hand, a virtually identical percentage (48%) have come to a far more somber conclusion, saying instead, “We’ve always had some people who were very poor and probably always will—there is no realistic way to end it.”

**Sympathetic to Many**

Americans go beyond expressing abstract concern for those who need help. When presented with specific scenarios of people who might need help, they show willingness to support a variety of people in a variety of difficult circumstances—at least for a limited time.

This study presented survey respondents with nine hypothetical individuals applying for welfare and asked them to judge whether or not each deserved benefits (Table 3). Clear majorities would opt to give welfare benefits to eight of the nine hypothetical welfare applicants, ranging from a physically and mentally handicapped man from a poor family, to a single mother who quit her job because of a lack of health benefits. Overwhelming majorities would approve welfare benefits when the individuals are described in sympathetic terms. For example, 97% say a physically and mentally handicapped man whose family could not support him deserves benefits; 89% favor benefits for a family man laid off after 20 years of work whose unemployment benefits are running out.

**Proving Themselves Worthy**

The public even approves of welfare benefits in situations that are less clear-cut: For example, six in ten (61%) would give welfare to a 25-year-old man who recently became homeless, is able-bodied, worked from time to time but has poor job skills and no high school degree; an identical majority would grant welfare to a single unemployed mother of three who has been on and off welfare for ten years. The only welfare applicant clearly rejected was a college-educated single mother from a middle-class family who quit her job to raise her newborn. Three-fourths (74%) would deny her benefits.

Americans have a sense of responsibility and obligation toward the less fortunate in their society. But Americans also insist that the less fortunate assume some obligation in return, that they “prove” themselves worthy of help and work towards independence. As later sections will show, the public attached very serious conditions and requirements to the benefits for each of the eight recipients, requirements intended to insure that aid is temporary and geared toward moving recipients into the working world.

Yes to “Assistance to the Poor,” No to “Welfare”

Although Americans want to help the poor, and support a safety net, welfare is not the answer as far as they are concerned. Welfare represents the status quo Americans oppose: It fosters dependency, it is fraught with abuse, and it is handled badly by the government. In the focus groups, participants quickly made a distinction between welfare and assistance to the poor.

“[Welfare] has to do with the permanency of it. [With] assistance you get the impression that it’s temporary, until you get back on your feet. And welfare, people just get on there and stay on it for the rest of their lives.”

— Cincinnati man

“Assistance implies they work, they need help but they’re going to make it temporary. But, [with welfare] you have people who are on it for generations. That’s their job.”

— Middletown, NY man

The public makes the same distinction between welfare and assistance to the poor in response to the survey. Almost six in ten (58%) say there is a difference between “assistance to the poor” and “welfare.” When respondents were asked to describe the difference between the two terms in their own words, people referred to welfare as a handout (24%), as a program that was abused (19%), and said it went to people who did not want to work (13%). People describe assistance to the poor, on the other hand, as being for those who are actually poor (19%), for people who want to help themselves (19%), and as something temporary (13%). Welfare is what Americans have; assistance to the poor is what they would like to have.

Many participants thought the myriad of programs which now compose welfare are so badly off course that they wanted to start from scratch. As one Albuquerque woman said, “If I was President, I would say: ‘We’re going to cut off all welfare from right now, and everybody has to reapply on a one-to-one basis’.”

**What’s In a Name?**

Trends in survey data have consistently shown that Americans are much more willing to support spending when poll questions refer to “assistance to the poor” rather than to “welfare.” Some analysts explain that this is an effect of question wording, where respondents thoughtlessly respond to different labels rather than different concepts. The public is not reacting to the actual programs that constitute welfare, they say, as much as to the words used to describe them. But our research indicates that the reverse is true: People answer the questions differently because welfare and assistance to the poor mean very different things to them. For most Americans, welfare by any other name would not smell sweeter.
Finding Five

Americans Want a Welfare System That Requires Work From the Very Beginning — Community Service for Anyone Receiving Benefits and a Transition to Paying Jobs as Quickly as Possible

Americans strongly believe that welfare recipients should work and would exempt practically no one from this requirement. A majority think welfare recipients — even a mentally and physically handicapped recipient — should be required to do community service in exchange for benefits. Most Americans hope recipients will become workers who pay taxes, and a large majority would require job training and education programs to help make this happen. But while a majority would invest time and money to retain recent welfare applicants for quality jobs, a majority would also push long-term welfare recipients to work as quickly as possible, even in menial jobs. These findings are consistent, with little variation across respondents from different demographic backgrounds.

Americans believe that work benefits individuals and society. Most think work adds meaning and a sense of accomplishment to their own lives and think it would do the same for welfare recipients. Most think the current welfare system undermines the work ethic and discourages recipients from working.

Reciprocity: Give Something Back

Americans attach a simple, moral corollary to helping the needy: “We will support your efforts to regroup and re-enter the mainstream, but in exchange, we expect you to give something back to the community.” That welfare recipients can get benefits while remaining idle is seen as wrong on three counts: It is not good for the recipients, it is unfair to the community, and it is morally offensive.

Almost six in ten Americans (57%) say requiring “recipients to do community service in exchange for benefits” is absolutely essential (Table 4). Eighty-five percent say they would be satisfied if recipients were “required to do something in exchange for their benefits — even if it was just raking leaves or cleaning roads.”

In focus groups, people ascribed several virtues to a community service requirement. Some thought it a good way to stop rewarding idleness. “I don’t think anyone should get something for nothing,” said a woman in Middletown, New York. Others thought it was simply fair to expect recipients to give something back to the community which was supporting them. “We’ve got to do something,” said an Albuquerque man. “If nothing else, they should do community service programs. Instead of sitting at home, have them picking up trash so they can feel like they’re doing something for society. At least they’re earning their keep.”

Others hope that a job — any job — will become the first step in a recipient’s climb out of the hazy trap of welfare. Some also hope that recipients will tire of doing routine, manual labor and be motivated to obtain better jobs.

“Hire people to collect trash and stuff. Give them a check, but they should have to work. Clean up the highways, get them working for the money. That’d be enough for them to get a real job.” — Cincinnati man

“You’re becoming a contributing member of society, even if it’s picking up leaves. And after a while, you’ll get another job.” — Sacramento man

When those respondents favoring required community service were asked why it was so important, their responses reflected all of the above reasons: 20% said recipients will acquire the skills necessary for regular jobs; 21% said they need to stay active so that collecting benefits doesn’t become a habit; 35% said they owe it to the community to give something back; and 24% volunteered that all of those reasons were important.

“You’re becoming a contributing member of society, even if it’s picking up leaves. And after a while, you’ll get another job.” — Sacramento man

The appeal of a community service requirement is strong. A majority of the public would grant benefits to eight of nine hypothetical welfare applicants mentioned earlier; but solid majorities would also require them to perform community service in exchange for those benefits (Table 3). More than half (57%) would even require commu-
nity service from a physically/mentally handicapped 25-year-old – possibly because they thought work would be more beneficial for him.

Make Work the Centerpiece
Americans believe that requiring welfare recipients to work should be the centerpiece of reform. This is their most urgent priority: to recast a system that many see as the very antithesis of work.

People understand that welfare recipients may need preparation to make the transition to paying jobs, and an overwhelming majority of Americans (77%) think “requiring enrollment in job training and education programs” is absolutely essential to improving welfare. In fact, compelling welfare recipients to enroll in job training and education programs tops a list of nine ways to improve welfare – a list which includes such measures as imposing time limits, reducing benefits, and paying surprise home visits to make sure recipients deserve their benefits (Table 4). When forced to choose the one answer out of nine which is most essential of all, the job and education requirement tops the list (37%). This is almost three times the percentage of respondents pointing to the next most popular reform, time limits (13%).

“Give me a fish and I’ll eat today, but teach me to fish and I’ll be OK.”
— Birmingham man

“I would love to be the bleeding-heart liberal that I used to be, but I can’t afford it anymore. When are they going to start taking responsibility for their actions? When are they going to start to work?”
— New York City woman

Doing Their Part
Virtually all (95%) say, “The goal of welfare reform should be to get people into real jobs that pay enough to get them off of welfare.” In sharp contrast to their emphasis on work, only 19% say reducing the benefits of most welfare recipients is absolutely essential to improving welfare. Americans seem far less interested in simply punishing recipients than in getting recipients to join mainstream society. In focus group interviews, the work theme emerged quickly and spontaneously. Participants would often clamor to move recipients into jobs and condemn welfare in the same breath.

“Even if it’s a menial job, most of us start out doing menial jobs. I worked as a waitress, and it encouraged me to do more. The most important thing is to get people working. They need to be in the economic life of the country.”
— Albuquerque woman

“When [welfare recipients] work, they’re not getting something for nothing. It sounds petty, but it’s important to know that everyone is doing their part.”
— Sacramento man

Americans place such enormous importance on work that they are even willing to continue some benefits for recipients who do find work. More than half (55%) think letting recipients “keep Medicaid if they get a job without health care benefits” is absolutely essential to improving welfare.

Once again, respondents from households receiving welfare are little different from other Americans. They express the same interest in moving into work: 96% say that the goal of welfare reform should be to get people into real jobs; 77% say requiring recipients to enroll in job training and education programs is an absolutely essential part of reform.

“I would love to be the bleeding-heart liberal that I used to be, but I can’t afford it anymore. When are they going to start taking responsibility for their actions? When are they going to start to work?”
— New York City woman

Long-timers vs First-timers
Americans place top priority on getting welfare recipients into jobs. But what kind of jobs do they expect recipients to get? Are they more interested in getting them into any kind of work, no matter how low-paying? To a large extent, their answer depends on whether recipients are new to welfare or seem to be addicted to it.

Americans give new welfare applicants who have been in the workforce the benefit of the doubt – almost as if they had somehow proved their bona fides. More than half (55%) would invest time and money to give such people education and training so they have a chance for better jobs that pay more; in contrast, 31% prefer to get such cases working right away, even if they have to take menial, low-paying jobs.

“A man who has worked 20 years in the system [and has just lost his job] is not going to take advantage of it. All he’s going to be looking for is temporary help to get back on his feet again. Retrain him, get him a job.”
— Middletown, NY woman

But this patience quickly wears thin when it comes to long-term recipients who have been on welfare for many years and have never held a steady job. Here, 58% say it is more important to get such recipients working right away, even if they have to take menial, low-paying jobs; only one-third
(34%) think it is more important to give them education and training so they have a chance for better jobs that pay more.

**Breaking the Hold of Idleness**

Some experts might question the public's logic and argue that it is the long-term recipient who most needs training and education. But the public comes to a different conclusion because its analysis is based on different assumptions about the psychology at work. The new applicant, people reason, is probably looking for help to get back on his feet, not for a permanent crutch. He has already proven he is willing to work steadily and pay his taxes. Thus, it is only right to support him when he has hit a stretch of bad luck.

The long-term recipient's problem is different, people believe. That person has somehow lost good work habits and become addicted to the welfare lifestyle. The best strategy is to get that person used to working again — as soon as possible. Better-paying jobs can wait; right now it is most urgent to shake this recipient loose from the welfare trap.

The long-term recipient's problem is different, people believe. That person has somehow lost good work habits and become addicted to the welfare lifestyle.

"They say they can't get jobs. Make them go out and go to those interviews. Make them go, make them go. Make them fill out a piece of paper that says 'I went.'"

— Middletown, NY woman

"There's too many jobs. It may not be what you want to do, but there's too many for someone not to find something to do."

— Cincinnati woman

**Work Adds Meaning to Life**

Americans want welfare recipients to work not only because they think that "getting something for nothing" is unfair, but also because they themselves find virtue and satisfaction in working. They look at work as more than simply something they must do to survive; they see it as an integral part of their lives, as something that adds meaning and self-respect.

Seven in ten Americans (69%) say work gives them a sense of accomplishment and is something they enjoy — that they would do it even if they did not have to; only three in ten (28%) say they work only to survive and make a living — and would stop if they could afford to.

Americans value work so much that they want schools to concentrate on transmitting the work ethic to children. Public Agenda's studies of attitudes toward education reveal that overwhelming majorities of Americans believe it is absolutely essential for the schools to teach "the value of hard work" (78%) and to teach "good work habits such as being responsible, on time, and disciplined" (83%). In fact, the only subject areas which Americans think are more important for the schools to teach are "basic reading, writing and math skills" and computer skills.

"Work teaches responsibility. If I'm responsible for myself, I don't expect things from other people."

— Birmingham woman

"Work will give them self-respect. Earning that money, not just getting it for free. It's all work."

— Middletown, NY woman

**Fear for the Work Ethic**

Moreover, Americans increasingly worry that the work ethic in their nation is threatened. In a 1992 Times Mirror poll, 63% said, "Many people today think they can get ahead without working hard and making sacrifices." Given their belief in the preeminence of work, Americans are bewildered by the thought that their tax dollars support a system which further undermines the very values they hold dear.

"Why work for anything when somebody's going to give it to you? And that attitude will affect the next generation."

— Birmingham woman

"There's no incentive for recipients...because when they're gainfully employed, they're doing less well than when they're on welfare."

— Cincinnati man

"[Welfare] brainwashes people into thinking that all they're good for is sitting back and let the government feed them. They have talents and abilities, but the institutions have lowered their expectations."

— Denver man

**Faith in Job Training**

Despite their anger about the perverse incentives they see in welfare, people voice a perhaps surprising degree of confidence that education and retraining can put things right. Almost nine in ten people (87%) are convinced that "many welfare recipients will become working citizens who pay taxes as a result of job training programs" (Table 6).

This is one reason the public insists on adding job training and education for almost all welfare cases. Respondents approved of giving welfare to eight of nine people with different circumstances who were applying for benefits. But in each case — even in the case of a physically and mentally handicapped 25-year-old from a poor family — more than three quarters also wanted to provide job training and education programs.
Even Mothers Should Work

Some advocates who are reluctant to change welfare argue that the majority of recipients are children and their mothers, in the apparent expectation that this information will make people more supportive of the system. But according to a Kaiser Family Foundation survey, 90% of Americans already understand that the majority of welfare recipients are children and mothers.6 And for this group of women, Americans want to apply the same standards that they do to others—they want mothers on welfare to move toward work and are willing to help them do so. Almost seven in ten Americans (68%) think an absolutely essential element of improving welfare is to “provide child care while mothers on welfare work or go to school” (Table 4).

The nine hypothetical welfare applicants presented in the survey include six mothers. Respondents would give benefits to all but one—a middle class mother who voluntarily quits her job to raise her child. But although people want to help these mothers, they also want them to work: strong majorities would require community service in exchange for those benefits (Table 3). And in each case, strong majorities would also require these mothers to enroll in job training and education programs. Finally, overwhelming majorities would provide child care to make all of this possible. For example, 65% would grant benefits to a welfare applicant described as a 30-year-old woman without a high school degree or job and who has a baby out of wedlock. But in turn, 76% would require her to do community service, 92% would want her to get education and job training, and 86% would add child care to her benefits.

The public’s reasoning is simple: For financial reasons, many families have had to send mothers to work soon after giving birth. Why should mothers on welfare be privileged exceptions?

“I Had To”

Some of the desire to move welfare mothers into work stems from the same resentment people feel about recipients protected from the daily pressures and tradeoffs with which they themselves must deal. Three-fourths (76%) say, “It’s not fair to give mothers on welfare the benefit of staying home with their kids when mothers who work do not have that luxury” (Table 7). Two-thirds (66%) reject the view that “we should enable welfare mothers to stay at home and care for their kids because young children are better off with their mothers.” Furthermore, respondents who are working mothers themselves hold the same views. The public’s reasoning is simple: for financial reasons, many families have had to send mothers to work soon after giving birth. Why should mothers on welfare be privileged exceptions?

“Someone has to work. I know very few people who can afford to stay home these days.”

—Birmingham woman

“I’d have loved to have stayed home when my daughter was two or three, but I couldn’t. I had to work. You’re giving them a choice of just sitting at home and collecting money. I’m glad I worked because I want my daughter to see that and learn that, so she’ll have some pride and dignity.”

—Albuquerque woman
Setting a Good Example

The Albuquerque woman quoted above brings up a second reason people think welfare mothers should work – to set an example for their kids. Virtually all respondents (94%) agree that welfare mothers will gain self-respect by working and that their children will learn the importance of work as a result.

“Everybody should work. They shouldn’t sit at home on welfare, children or no. They need to get self-esteem from what they do, and they’ll carry that from generation to generation.” – Sacramento woman

One of the most important economic and cultural shifts evident in American life in the past three decades has been the movement of women into the workforce. Just as dramatic has been the increased expectation – for many families, the financial imperative – that women return to the workforce soon after giving birth to children. “It’s just a fact of life these days that mothers cannot stay at home,” said a Cincinnati woman. When this reality combines with the public’s preexisting frustrations with welfare, the result is a forceful judgment: moving welfare mothers off public assistance and into the workforce is right on moral and practical grounds. People’s reasoning is relatively straightforward: work is what society expects of most other mothers, work is better for mothers on welfare, and work is better for their children.

“The First One is On Us”

The majority of the public also want to deny welfare mothers additional benefits when they have more children. Sixty percent say “not increasing benefits when mothers on welfare have more children” is absolutely essential to improving welfare (Table 4). People can understand making a mistake and having one child without the requisite financial wherewithal, but they do not believe the system should reward people for making the same mistake again and again. In several focus groups, participants said, only half-jokingly: “The first one is on us, but after that, you are on your own.”

About two-thirds (65%) approve of granting welfare benefits to an applicant described as a 30-year-old woman with no high school degree or job who has a baby out of wedlock (Table 3). When the next scenario described that same woman as having a second baby out of wedlock, only 13% wanted her to get additional benefits; the plurality (47%) wanted her benefits to stay the same.

“I don’t feel that they have more babies to get more welfare, but I think they feel comfortable having more babies because they know they’ve got money coming in. Welfare takes the worry away.”

– Albuquerque woman

Taking the Worry Away

For most Americans, women having children while on welfare is one of the most troubling elements of the current system. They are outraged at giving continued support to people who show a pattern of irresponsible behavior; they suspect that additional benefits encourage that irresponsibility; and they are sure the children are suffering. In focus groups, people sometimes accuse women of having kids just to get benefits. Some go on to modify their views, saying added benefits are one of many contributing factors, in effect protecting recipients from the consequences of irresponsible behavior.

“I don’t feel that they have more babies to get more welfare, but I think they feel comfortable having more babies because they know they’ve got money coming in. Welfare takes the worry away.”

– Albuquerque woman

An Effective Sanction

In any case, 72% of respondents believe that if the system stops giving mothers on welfare extra benefits when they have more children, “most will be more careful and have fewer children.” Only one in five (22%) think “most will continue having as many children as before.”
Americans Support Reforms — Including Time Limits — Which They Believe Will Get Recipients Working. They Are Far Less Interested in Reforms That Seem Tangential to That Goal

In the public's view, work should be the centerpiece of welfare reform. Thus, Americans rally in decisive numbers to the cause of reforms they think will direct recipients toward work. Most Americans are not interested in simply punishing welfare recipients — for example, few think cutting benefits is key. But neither do they want to coddle recipients. People are largely unconcerned that getting welfare may be a humiliating experience or that benefits are too low.

The public's vision of welfare reform is comprehensive and would amount to a significant expansion — and redirection — of welfare programs. When focus group participants are confronted with the costs of reform, they do not pull back — in large measure because their support is driven by moral, not financial, considerations.

Don't Punish, Don't Coddle

Americans are generally not interested in changing welfare merely to punish recipients: if they were, far more than 4% would say they want to get rid of welfare altogether; and far more than 19% would say cutting the benefits of most welfare recipients is key to improving welfare.

But nor do most Americans want to insulate recipients from the unpleasantness associated with welfare. For example, more than half (56%) reject the view that welfare benefits are too low. More than half (54%) also reject the view that "the system makes getting benefits a humiliating experience." Perhaps not surprisingly, respondents from households receiving welfare benefits disagree: 57% say welfare benefits are too low; and 55% feel getting benefits is a humiliating experience.

Sympathy for Those Who Feel Shame

Interestingly, some focus group participants thought that a sense of shame about welfare was useful because it deterred people from reaching for it too quickly.

"There is [a stigma] for some people. Part of the thing that helps them get someplace is the feeling of shame that they're not taking care of themselves....The ones we're having problems with are the ones who aren't ashamed." — Albuquerque woman

"Our parents would have been embarrassed to be on welfare. But these days, people don't care. They don't take enough pride in themselves to care about it." — Denver woman

As they traded personal anecdotes, focus group participants seemed to identify with recipients who were reluctant to take welfare benefits because of a sense of pride or shame. They empathized with such recipients, and even wanted them to take advantage of the benefits. But if recipients did not evince a sense of shame, participants could emotionally disengage and view them with disdain.

One Birmingham woman recounted with a touch of pride her daughter’s reluctance to apply for food stamps, even though she became eligible because her home was destroyed by a hurricane. Her daughter had finally relented but sent her husband to do the food shopping. The story provoked sympathetic head-nodding and words of support from the other focus group participants.

Facets of Reform

Consistently, the debate over how to improve welfare — in Washington, DC and in state capitals across the nation — revolves around some common principles of reform, such as time limits, benefit reduction, and job training programs. This study gauges how the American public respond to nine such reforms, asking which they believe are "absolutely essential" to improving welfare and why.

Job Training and Education

Since moving people into work is considered the preeminent goal, requiring recipients to enroll in job training and education programs is the most popular reform. As discussed earlier, when forced to choose the most essential of all nine possible reforms, a plurality (37%) opts for the job and education requirement. Three-fourths (77%) say this is absolutely essential to improving welfare.
Americans feel that many welfare recipients are there because they lack the skills and education to work; and because they’ve gotten into the “welfare habit.” Requiring them to enroll in job training and education programs would thus serve a dual purpose: recipients could acquire real skills and the habit of leaving the house each day to do something purposeful and constructive.

**Time Limits**

One of the most frequently discussed welfare reforms is time limits, and it is one that resonates with the public. Almost six in ten respondents (57%) say “putting a strict time limit on how long people receive welfare benefits” is absolutely essential (Table 4). That this reform appeals to so many Americans is understandable, given their concerns that welfare too often becomes a permanent lifestyle, and that people abuse the system by staying on too long:

“It’s like children growing up and never leaving home. How long are we going to have to take care of somebody? There has to be a cut-off.”

—Cincinnati woman

“There are people who just aren’t going to work. But you have to take a get-tough approach and make their life miserable for them. Motivation. They might turn to a life of crime or sponge off relatives. But you have to get tough so they make a choice to do something different.”

—Sacramento man

In further testimony to the popularity of time limits, overwhelming majorities of respondents who approved of giving benefits to the nine hypothetical welfare applicants also wanted time limits placed on those benefits. Eight in ten (83%) would even place time limits on the benefits of an applicant sympathetically described as a woman with children who is abandoned by her husband of 15 years, who has never worked, and who is running out of money (Table 3). The sole exception they make is for a welfare applicant described as a physically and mentally handicapped 25-year-old. Here, 80% say time limits are not appropriate.

Support for the concept of time limits is one area where respondents’ views are influenced by political affiliation: Republicans (67%) and Independents (59%) stand out as stronger supporters of time limits than do Democrats (48%). Interestingly however, when it comes to placing time limits on the benefits of the nine hypothetical welfare applicants, support is consistently strong across party lines.

**No Simple Formula**

The fact that respondents exempt a severely handicapped welfare applicant from time limits—which they applied to all the other applicants—suggests that their notion of appropriate time limits is nuanced, not formulaic. In fact, when directly asked how long time limits for welfare recipients should be, a 31% plurality—an unusually high number of respondents—volunteers “it depends.” The rest of the responses disperse around a variety of time points.

“It depends on the individual: For some people, six months wouldn’t be enough. If it would take two years for the program, I’m all for that. [Even a four-year nursing program,] if she can show she’s going to school, using the money for the right things, OK. Child care, OK. Because when she’s done she can pay for her own child care and go to work. Case by case. Build flexibility in.”

—Sacramento man

Time limits are appealing because they promise to create a sense of urgency among welfare recipients and within the welfare bureaucracy. The public thinks that recipients get too comfortable staying on welfare while welfare administrators eventually come to handle their cases in too routine a fashion. Time limits are seen as a good way to light a fire under the feet of the system.

**Time limits are seen as a good way to light a fire under the feet of the system.**

But just as people reach for time limits and insist that recipients start working, they also want to prepare recipients to sustain themselves. Support for providing child care, training programs, and health care benefits is driven by a desire to give recipients a chance for a smooth transition into the real world.

**Reciprocity and Community Service**

To the public, another important component of welfare reform is community service. Fifty-seven percent say “requiring welfare recipients to do community service, like cleaning parks, in exchange for their benefits” is an absolutely essential way to improve welfare (Table 4). Over eight in ten (85%) say, “If welfare recipients were required to do something in exchange for their benefits — even it was just raking leaves or cleaning roads — I would be satisfied.” For all hypothetical cases of welfare recipients—even in the case of the physically and mentally handicapped male from a poor family—
substantial majorities of those who would grant benefits wanted to couple those benefits with some kind of community service (Table 3).

Cutting Costs

Americans are not focused on keeping the costs of welfare down, and cutting the benefits of welfare recipients was last on the list of reforms. In fact, totaling the costs of the reforms they favor would probably result in a far heftier bill. When all is said and done, the addition of the training, education, and child care programs people say they want would amount to a giant expansion — and redirection — of the welfare system. But it is the redirection that most interests them — moving away from a system that encourages wrong to a system that encourages right.

When confronted in focus groups with the enormous costs implied by their strategy, people hardly blinked. They acknowledged the higher costs but talked about reform as an investment that would pay dividends in the future. Addressing the cost issue of job training, one Denver man said: “In the long term, it would be cheaper because people will be living their lives and producing valuable goods and services.” Some thought that initially higher costs would be offset by smaller welfare rolls down the line.

In the focus groups, when confronted with the enormous costs implied by their strategy, people hardly blinked.

“[I’d be willing to do what it takes to get her] off welfare in six months, even if that means there has to be $100 more a month to pay for child care. The investment of six months, even if it’s double, is better than 30 years of welfare.”

— Sacramento man

Sometimes, people’s safety hatch was the time limit proviso: “It has to be temporary,” said a Cincinnati man. “If you tell me it’s going to cost more money now, but save us in the long run, it would be worth it. Tell recipients: ‘Regardless, you’ve got two years. And if you want training, you can get it.’”

Comprehensive Reform

Through their focus group comments and responses to the survey, Americans make it clear that no single change is likely to do the job. Americans want comprehensive reform that fundamentally alters the goals and methods of welfare. For example, when considering what to do about the hypothetical welfare applicants, in almost every case respondents combine time limits with job training and education programs, community service and, where appropriate, child care. In no case — not even the applicant described as mentally and physically handicapped — were respondents willing to simply grant benefits without any proviso.

“If you go back on [welfare], you have to promise not to get pregnant again. You must agree to go into job training, and you will only be on the rolls long enough to get a job.”

— Albuquerque woman

For moral and pragmatic reasons, Americans seek to fine-tune and calibrate benefits to the specific circumstances and to combine privileges with responsibilities. They couple job training and education programs with time limits to give recipients the tools to make it on their own and simultaneously insure that a deadline will provide a sense of urgency. They would require welfare mothers to enter a workforce training program and to earn their keep with community service; but they also recognize that child care is necessary to make these feasible. They distinguish between how they want to deal with long-term recipients and first-time applicants.

In short, the public is doing some hard thinking about how to solve the welfare problem, and their thinking is not doctrinaire or simplistic. People are upset with welfare, they are clear about what bothers them, and, in focus groups, one can almost see them working hard to reconstruct welfare so that it makes sense and does good rather than harm.
Many Americans Have Not Fully Wrestled with the Possible Consequences of the Reforms They Support

Americans are certain that welfare is fundamentally misguided; they have a clear sense about what bothers them; and they are attracted to reforms which focus on getting recipients to work. But their support for different reform planks is pragmatic and nonideological – they support reforms they think will work. If such measures as time limits or job training programs bring unforeseen consequences – like substantially more homeless or expansion of the welfare rolls – many would reconsider their support. Focus groups also indicate that in discussions, many Americans develop an increased recognition that reforming welfare is more complex than they had thought. But rather than giving up, they often redouble their efforts and attempt to work through these complexities.

What If...

Of all the policy issues Public Agenda has discussed with ordinary citizens – from crime, to education, to retirement – none has triggered such spontaneous and deliberative reaching for solutions as welfare. In the focus group discussions – and in the survey – respondents put on the policymakers’ hat in an attempt to fashion a new and improved welfare system that relies on comprehensive combinations of programs, rules, and exemptions. People assumed positive results would ensue. Yet since so much is unknown and debatable about the impact of these policy innovations, this study explored how the public would react if reforms did not work as planned.

Second Thoughts About Time Limits

Focus group participants were presented with several negative scenarios that might develop as a consequence of time limits. Overall, their commitment to time limits was not doctrinaire or inhumane. Even participants who strongly favored time limits were willing to consider extensions if welfare recipients were not ready for seemingly legitimate reasons (e.g. a sick child who prevented a woman from completing a training course.)

Similarly, the survey asked supporters of time limits whether they would make exceptions for “welfare recipients who face medical or family emergencies just as their benefits run out.” Almost nine in ten (87%) said they would reconsider the time limit; only 11% would not.

In focus groups, people struggled to design a subtle and finely-tuned system that would carefully distinguish legitimate from illegitimate extensions for individuals. Americans seem to be searching for a system ruled by common sense – not bureaucratic rules applied without regard to circumstances. But some participants also became uneasy over what constitutes justifiable circumstances; whether the people operating the system could be trusted to make these distinctions; and at what point the system should draw the final line and say “no more.” Many started to hesitate and began to question whether they really had come up with “the answer.”

“There’s going to be people who don’t do anything and let themselves get homeless. You can’t legislate initiative. That makes me think twice about it.”

— Sacramento man

“I don’t know. I don’t think that this is a problem the government can handle on its own.”

— New York City woman

There were also people, like this Albuquerque man, who held firm and refused to consider exceptions to time limits because they were wary of the slippery-slope: “You start making exceptions, you start perpetuating. It becomes a big machine. I think it needs to be: ‘Here’s your shot, take your luck.’ There’s always going to be things – too bad. There have to be limits to cut abuse.”

A Growth in Homelessness?

The study also explored reactions to the possibility, raised by some commentators in the welfare debate, that time limits will vastly increase the number of homeless people. Much of the public would be disturbed if this occurred, although a significant number would stay the course. A little